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ABSTRACT

National Issues Forums (NIF) bring together citizens to deliberate and make choices about challenging social and political issues of the day. These forums have addressed issues such as the economy, education, health care, foreign affairs, and crime. This report is an analysis of what happened in a forum on "Money and Politics" that took place in 44 states and the District of Columbia. To learn how citizens feel about this issue, Doble Research Associates, a public interest consulting firm, analyzed what happened in these forums, including questionnaire results from 1,457 participants. It is divided into the following sections: "A Summary of People's Thinking as They Deliberated" (presents an overview of the themes that emerged from the 44 forums); "The Framework for Deliberation" (describes the framework used in the forums); "Working Through: People's Thinking as They Deliberated" (describes in detail how people felt about money and politics as they deliberated in a forum); "Questions and Answers about the Forums" (addresses key questions about participants' views on the issue); and "The Impact of Deliberation" (describes how people felt after the forums). Contains a summary of what 581 high school students thought about the issue of money and politics, the results of pre- and post-forum questionnaires, and an explanation of the research methodology. (BT)

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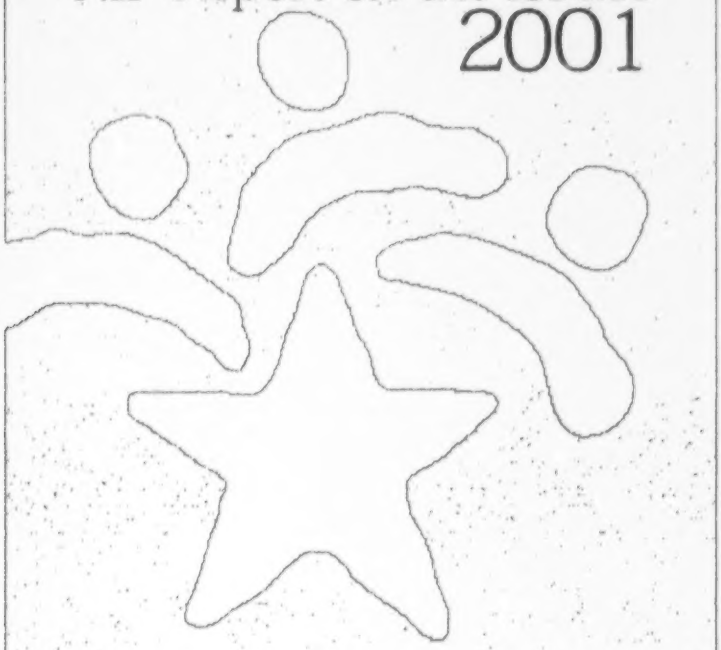

Money and Politics
Who Owns Democracy?

by John Doble Research Associates, Inc.

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A Different Kind of Talk, Another Way to Act

SO 033 424

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Money and Politics
Who Owns Democracy?

A Report for the National Issues Forums
by Doble Research Associates
November 2001

National Issues Forums (NIF)
NIF is a nonpartisan nationwide network of educational and community organizations that deliberate about nationwide issues. NIF forums do not advocate a specific solution or point of view. Rather, deliberative forums provide a way for citizens to exchange ideas and experiences with one another, and make more thoughtful and informed decisions. For more information about NIF, contact National Issues Forums Research, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459-2777. Phone: (800) 433-7834. **www.nifi.org**

Doble Research Associates
Doble Research specializes in exploring public opinion about complex public issues.
For more information, contact Doble Research at 375 Sylvan Avenue, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632.
(201) 568-7200. **www.dobleresearch.com**

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About This Report

This report is an analysis of what happened in National Issues Forums (NIF) that took place in 44 states and the District of Columbia, on "Money and Politics," a sample of the hundreds of NIF forums that continue to take place across the country. To learn how citizens feel about this issue, Doble Research Associates, a public interest consulting firm, analyzed what happened in these forums, including questionnaire results from 1,457 participants who sent in a questionnaire by August 1, 2001.

National Issues Forums bring together citizens to deliberate and make choices about challenging social and political issues of the day. They have addressed issues such as the economy, education, health care, foreign affairs, and crime. Throughout the nation, thousands of civic, service, and religious organizations, as well as libraries, high schools, and colleges sponsor forums. The sponsoring organizations select topics based on citizens' concerns, then design and coordinate their own forum programs.

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Questionnaire Results shows the results of the pre- and postforum questionnaires.
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About National Issues Forums describes NIF in greater detail.
About Doble Research provides information about the firm that prepared this report.

A Summary of People's Thinking as They Deliberated

1. The Impact of Money on Politics: Participants in National Issues Forums on "Money and Politics" saw the influence of money on the political system as damaging and harmful in three ways: first, they said, money warps political decision making so that the public interest is routinely subordinated to special interests; second, they said it skews the election process, giving well-financed candidates a great and unfair advantage; third, they said it alienates ordinary Americans who often feel that their voices do not count.

2. The Impact of Money on the Public Dialogue: Forum participants said that beyond its harmful impact on government and elections, money corrupts the "public dialogue," the exchanges and ideas espoused by candidates, officeholders, and other public leaders that citizens hear, consider, and deliberate about. Forum participants operationally defined the issue of money and politics in public terms – in terms of the public's right to hear. Money, they said, both limits the voices that people hear and amplifies some at the expense of others. The net effect, they said, is that many people do not hear leaders who speak to their concerns or articulate their deepest values.

3. Money and Politics and the Media: Understanding how people define the issue helps clarify why so many Americans feel frustrated by the news media. Instead of helping the public understand complex issues and sort through information and arguments about them, forum participants identified five ways that the news media exacerbate the problem.

4. The Desire for a Level Playing Field: Defining the issue in terms of people's right to hear or listen also helps explain why so many participants said we should reduce the influence of money by "leveling the playing field" in terms of elections.

5. Easier Access to the Media to Level the Playing Field: A large majority of participants said the way to "level the playing field" is give all major candidates for public office free or low-cost airtime on television and radio. That way, they said, the public would be able to hear more clearly the voices and messages of those who seek to lead.

6. Using Public Financing to Level the Playing Field: A majority of participants said the way to "level the playing field" is through the public financing of political campaigns, which would enable more voices to be heard while simultaneously reducing the importance of contributions. However, a sizable minority opposed this idea.

7. Changed Perceptions about Lobbyists and Special Interests: It is often the case that as people deliberate about a complex issue in what is often a two-hour National Issues Forum, they learn more about it and have time to consider other points of view. A rather common outcome is that people's attitudes are modified as they take in new information or considerations. In these forums, participants' views about lobbyists and special interests changed, with a good deal of people's initial antipathy melting as they learned more and deliberated about the role of these groups.

8. Changed Perceptions about Disclosure: Almost without exception, participants favored full and immediate disclosure of all campaign contributions, including disclosure in the media and on the Internet. But as they deliberated, participants said disclosure would not curb the influence of money or remedy the problems they had identified.

9. Mixed Feelings about Direct Democracy Measures: Participants' attitudes about this aspect of the issue also evolved over the course of the forums. While most favored the idea of giving the public more direct say in running public affairs, a fair number also saw problems with the idea and gave it, at best, their qualified support.

10. Interlocking Issues: Participants see "money and politics" not as a single issue, but as a number of connected, interlocking issues. A woman from Panama City, Florida, explained it this way:

> We should pursue the issue of allowing candidates free airtime on radio and television in order to have their voices heard without having to cram their ideas into exorbitantly expensive 30-second spots. If candidates' views were made more accessible to the public, [people] might take a greater interest in picking a qualified candidate and not be so disillusioned with what they consider to be corrupt leadership. And qualified leaders would be more likely to serve the public interest.

The Framework for Deliberation

Participants deliberated using the NIF issue book, ***Money and Politics*** prepared by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. Rather than conforming to the ideas of any one advocate, each approach represents a distinct set of American priorities and views. The issue book outlines the issue in a nonpartisan way and presents three approaches to addressing the issue:

Approach 1: Reform the Campaign Fund-Raising System
This approach says that democracy cannot thrive unless political candidates have enough money to inform citizens about their competing ideas and qualifications. The problem is that more than 90 percent of political contributions come from wealthy contributors and special interests, which often have matters pending before government. As a result, many elections are fund-raising competitions, and the democratic principle of "one person, one vote" is corrupted into "one donor, much influence." In this view, the nation must regain control of elections by choosing from a menu of reform options that includes publicly funded campaigns and regulations that prevent special interests from subverting the public interest. The nation is moving in this direction, but it's been a halfhearted effort lacking a real commitment to clean up politics. It's time to get serious about making real reforms.

Approach 2: Rein In Lobbyists and Politicians
This approach says that campaign finance reforms will only disappoint and disillusion citizens because they focus narrowly on political campaign contributions, which are dwarfed by the billions annually spent on lobbying politicians. So reforms that curb special interests' spending on political campaigns merely redirect the flow of money in politics, sending it deeper underground. In this view, the way to reduce money's corrupting influence is by exerting much more control over the way politicians and bureaucrats at every level of government interact with special interest lobbies. In addition to new restrictions on lobbying, there also need to be more restrictions on politicians. Ballot measures, which permit voters in some states to enact or repeal laws when politicians ignore the public will, should be permitted in all states and at the federal level. Laws should also make it easier for voters to recall elected officials who aren't serving the public interest.

Approach 3: Publicize All Political Donations, Don't Regulate Them
This approach says that our representative system of democracy has withstood the test of time and, until the 1970s, worked well without much regulation of campaign finance. Then, the Watergate scandal precipitated a rush to regulate political contributions, restricting everyone's freedom. But freedom resists regulation, and the reform effort backfired, systematically distorting our democratic system and causing more damage than the occasional bribery scandal ever did. Elections are now tipped toward incumbents, celebrities, and the rich. Most challengers cannot raise enough money to compete. Political gridlock is epidemic. To revive democracy, we need to free candidates and advocates to raise the money they need for competitive campaigns that draw public attention to important issues and decisions. A new requirement for fuller and faster disclosure of all political donations is the best way to deter corruption and head off conflicts of interest.

Working Through: People's Thinking as They Deliberated

1. The Impact of Money on Politics: *Participants in National Issues Forums on "Money and Politics" saw the influence of money on the political system as damaging and harmful in three ways: first, they said, money warps political decision making so that the public interest is routinely subordinated to special interests; second, they said it skews the election process, giving well-financed candidates a great and unfair advantage; third, they said it alienates ordinary Americans who often feel that their voices do not count.*

The Public's Starting Point: As participants took up the issue of money and politics in forums in 44 states and the District of Columbia, they overwhelmingly began with one idea: money, they said, translates into political power, which has a corrosive, damaging impact on our political system and the public's welfare. Indeed, some defined political power in terms of money. "Money is power," said a man from Dallas. A woman from Sumter, South Carolina, expressed the same thought, saying, "Money and power go together."

In forum after forum, participants said money shapes decision making so that government, especially at the federal level, consistently puts the special interests of the rich and powerful ahead of the common public interest. A man from Des Moines said, "Common Cause and others can document that the folks who vote for a special interest like, say, big tobacco are almost always the [ones who] get contributions from that interest." A moderator from Mount Pleasant, Michigan, said "Our people felt that votes can just be bought." A moderator from Honolulu said that in a series of forums at and around the state capital, participants felt "political decisions are made to benefit moneyed interests, not the public interest."

Participants said the integrity of elected officials is regularly compromised because they owe so much to the donors who helped them win election. To a roomful of nodding heads, a woman at a forum in a correctional institution in Muncy, Pennsylvania, said "Once in office, campaign promises are out the window [because of] the candidate owing the campaign donor his or her money's worth." A man at a forum in St. Paul expressed the same thought saying, "Anyone who doesn't believe [big contributors] expect something in return [for their contributions] is living in a dream world." A moderator from El Paso said, "Our people felt that politicians can be bought."

Participants did not much distinguish between the two major political parties. Some pointed to the recent tax cut while others cited presidential pardons as examples of influence by big contributors who expect something in return. And virtually without exception, participants agreed that if contributors do not get something tangible, they at least get special access to make their case. A moderator from Valparaiso, Indiana, said "Our group felt that those without money constantly have to knock on doors and beg an audience." An Oregon man said, "I don't have the kind of access to resources [that would enable me] to really have an impact on the decisions elected officials make."

Beyond its impact on decision making, money, participants said, has a second effect – it skews the entire election process. "People in our forum felt that elections are 'bought' because

the candidates who can raise the most money are the ones who get elected," said a moderator from DuPage, Illinois. Nearly four out of five agreed that candidates depend too heavily on large campaign gifts from wealthy donors.

Moreover, participants said, the ability of even the most-dedicated public official to do his or her job is impaired by the constant, pressing need to raise money for the next campaign. "Our people felt that officeholders spend so much time raising money that they don't have time to do the job they were elected to do," said a moderator from Louisville. A moderator from Rapid City, South Dakota, heard the same thing. "Our group," she said, "said people in Washington are spending too much time raising money and not enough time doing their job."

Most participants saw the issue in national terms and talked about the federal government. But some pointed to local manifestations. A moderator from Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, said that in his forum, people talked about a developer who wanted land rezoned. In Columbus, Ohio, a moderator reported that people told stories about building contractors "who were big contributors and not held accountable for the quality of what they built." A moderator from Honolulu said people there talked about legalized gambling, saying "big money is coming in [and participants were afraid that] the lobbyists will win, even though polls show most people don't want it."

Participants said the third way that money influences politics is perhaps the most serious of all - the alienating effect it has on ordinary Americans. Participants said they, and a great many Americans like them, feel shut out from the political process. A student at the Oklahoma State University was blunt, saying, "If you're not wealthy, you don't matter." A woman from Portland, Oregon, said alienation is greatest among certain groups. "From growing up in a lower socioeconomic background," she said, "I know [that the impact of money] makes poor people feel like their only choice is not to participate because their interests and values aren't represented by the billionaires or big money."

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2. The Impact of Money on the Public Dialogue: *People in the National Issues Forums said that beyond its harmful impact on government and elections, money corrupts the "public dialogue," the exchange of ideas espoused by candidates, officeholders, and other leaders that citizens hear, consider, and deliberate about. Participants operationally defined the issue of money and politics in public terms – in terms of the public's right to hear. Money, they said, both limits the voices people hear and amplifies some at the expense of others. The net effect, they said, is that many people do not hear leaders who speak to their concerns or articulate their deepest values.*

Defining the Issue in Public Terms: In 1981, Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research organization, conducted a comprehensive study of Americans' attitudes about free speech and freedom of the press. That report, ***The Speaker and the Listener,*** found that most people define "freedom of speech" in ***public terms.*** That is, people operationally conceive of "freedom of speech," not in terms of the ability of speakers to say whatever they want, but in terms of the ability of citizens to listen or to hear all that any public speaker might say.

The report said that since most citizens do not think of themselves as public speakers, they feel that the essential freedom to be protected by the First Amendment is citizens' right to listen or hear all the voices in the marketplace of ideas. If people lack the ability to hear all

voices, they cannot consider and decide about issues and candidates. Only after deliberating about issues and candidates can the public set the boundaries of political permission within which policy will enjoy broad, deep, enduring public support.

In the preforum, participants said money harms the public dialogue in two ways: first, it restricts the number of voices the public can hear. "Instead of the best people as leaders," said a Detroit man, "we're getting people who have been paid for." A Des Moines woman said, "Without a lot of political contributions, new leaders can't participate or run for office." As many as 84 percent agreed that money limits the voices people can hear during a campaign because "high campaign costs discourage good people from running for office." (See Table 1.)

Preforum participants also said that money amplifies certain voices at the expense of others. A man in St. Paul said, "Money talks! [If you have] more money, your voice is louder." A moderator from California said, "People in our forum agreed that money buys a great big megaphone. And that without money, it's like your battery is dead." Participants said that because the public cannot consider challengers who can't get their message out, 79 percent agreed "current election laws favor those who already hold office." (See Table 1.)

Because the voices in the public dialogue are either limited or amplified, many citizens, participants said, find it hard to hear someone who speaks to them, addresses their concerns, or talks about their needs. A woman from Detroit said that the "little guy's" voice is not heard, adding, "When a wealthy guy gets elected, he'll pass laws that help his rich friends instead of helping the little guy who can barely pay for his children's shoes."

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3. Money and Politics and the News Media: ***Understanding how people define this issue helps clarify why so many Americans feel frustrated by the news media. Instead of helping the public understand complex public issues and sort through information and arguments about them, forum participants identified five ways that the news media exacerbate the problem.***

Money and Politics and the News Media: Participants said the news media intensify the problems caused by money in five ways:

First, instead of countering the effects of money, which restricts the voices the public hears, the media further limit those voices while simultaneously filtering information so that people do not hear directly from public leaders. A moderator from Des Moines said, "Our group said people's willingness to donate to a campaign depends on a [candidate's] viability, which is [determined] by how TV presents the campaign." A man from Detroit said, "Instead of our information coming directly from the mouth of the candidates, it comes from the way the news about them is reported."

The second way the media add to the problem, a number of participants said, is by not presenting issues fairly. A woman from Panama City, Florida, said "At one time you could not tell what a certain announcer was in favor of. But those days are gone." A moderator from Du Page, Illinois, said "In our forum, people felt that the media do not just report what they see, they put their own spin on the news." In Columbus, Ohio, people felt that "opinions are formed, not informed" by the media.

The third way the media was felt to exacerbate problems caused by money was that they do not help people sort through manipulative, deceptive ads. "How does the average person know [if] what's on television is true, or deceitful or manipulative?" asked a woman in a forum in Des Moines. A moderator from Rockville, Maryland, said, "In our forum, the media was seen as an instrument of corruption [instead of clarification]." A moderator from Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, said participants there felt that "special interests should not be on TV because there's no filter for what is true and not true."

Fourth, a number of participants complained that the news media focus too much on overly personal information. A Florida man said, "I wouldn't run for public office [because] of fear of the warping of any point of view [of mine] so that it would be portrayed in an unfair way." An Iowa man said:

> Many people won't run for office because [they worry about] "How much of your life do you want under the microscope?" Maybe something in your past could be misconstrued. In that aspect, you're not at the mercy of the public. You're at the mercy of the press.

Finally, some said the media intensify cynicism. An Iowa man said the reason the public thinks all officeholders are crooked is because of the media. "And that," he added, "really encourages young people to say, my vote doesn't count anyway." A woman from Portland, Oregon, said:

> All we hear in the media is that all this money is out there, and that it's being sent to certain [candidates]. But that's all [the information] we get. Which leaves us with an uncomfortable feeling [but not enough information to do anything].

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4. The Desire for a Level Playing Field: ***Defining the issue in terms of people's right to hear or listen also helps explain why so many participants said we should reduce the influence of money by "leveling the playing field" in terms of elections.***

Level the Playing Field: Time and again, participants said that, instead of a system that allows just only candidates with money to get their message out, all candidates should have a roughly equal chance of being heard and considered by the public (with "roughly" left undefined). "We need to make an even playing field," said a man from Roslyn Heights, New York. "We'd like to see some sort of leveling of the playing field for political candidates running for office," said a woman from Des Moines. One of the hundreds of people who participated in an on-line forum wrote, "There needs to be a greater sense of inclusion in politics that could be created if candidates for office were forced to stand on more equal ground with each other."

The principle underlying the desire for a more level playing field was to ensure that voters are able to consider all candidates and points of view. A man from Poughkeepsie said, "We should be willing to let all candidates be heard [because that will] ensure that the interests of the people are served." An Oklahoma State University student said, "Every candidate should have a chance, and that chance should be as fair as possible."

When they considered just how to level the playing field, many favored putting new limits on contributions, especially by organizations. In Topeka, participants wanted to "limit the flow of money toward politics." A woman from Rindge, New Hampshire, said "The amount of money going for [candidates] to use has to be equalized so all the candidates can get their information out to the people." In the postforum questionnaire, 70 percent favored strictly limiting how much money citizens and special interests can give to political causes. (See Table 2.)

Another idea some favored was to shorten campaigns. Moderators at a forum in Columbus, Ohio, said participants there felt that "campaigns should be one-month long," with one woman pointing to the British system as a model. A man from Des Moines agreed, saying, "Shortening campaigns [would] at least be part of the answer [because] no matter how much money you raise, you'd have a limited amount of time to spend it."

5. Easier Access to the Media to Level the Playing Field: *A large majority of participants said the way to "level the playing field" is give all major candidates for public office free or low-cost airtime on television and radio. That way, they said, the public would be able to more clearly hear the voices and messages of those who seek to lead.*

Free or Low-Cost Access to the Media: In most forums, participants talked about the need for access to the media and how that relates to the problems of money and politics. A number of them said the need for so much money is driven by the high cost of advertising, especially on television. "The greatest sucking sound for money is for the media and the cost of portraying my political point of view in a 15- or 30-second commercial and doing that thousands of times in a campaign," said an Iowa man. A woman from Panama City, Florida, said, "Some candidates weren't heard because they didn't have enough money." People in an Atlanta forum, a moderator said, felt that "the cost of television ads is prohibitive."

Many participants were concerned about access. A woman from Hoschton, Georgia, said "I'm concerned about access to the media of candidates from smaller parties." A college student from Florida complained that when she went to vote, "There was a list of candidates I'd never heard of, and I wish I knew something about their views."

Many participants said candidates would not need so much money and the playing field would be more level if radio and television time were free (or at least available to candidates at a very low cost). A Florida man said, "People running for office should have free and equal airtime [because] it's important that everybody hear their views." A man from Poughkeepsie said, "In Canada, every candidate gets free airtime." A number of participants wondered why candidates have to pay in the U.S. In Atlanta, a moderator said her group asked why candidates have to pay "since the public owns the airways." In the postforum questionnaire, 63 percent favored requiring radio and TV stations to give free airtime to candidates. (See Table 2.)

6. Using Public Financing to Level the Playing Field: *A majority of participants said the way to "level the playing field" is through public financing of political campaigns, which would enable more voices to be heard while simultaneously reducing the importance of contributions. However, a sizable minority opposed this idea.*

Support for Public Financing: Most participants said the best way to ensure that all candidates have a roughly equal chance of being heard is through a system of public financing. Forum participants favored public financing by 53 to 40 percent, EVEN IF that would cost taxpayers more money. (See Table 6.)

"People in our forum favored leveling the playing field with public money and public financing of political campaigns," said a moderator in Laurel Lake, Missouri. A man from Dallas said that public financing would "let all those who are campaigning come to the top so we could see [all of] them." He added, "We need to see everybody, which we can't do now, so we'll never know if [the ones we didn't see] were good candidates." A moderator from Honolulu said people there strongly favored public financing. And a woman from Poughkeepsie said:

> Publicly funded campaigns would eliminate the presence and influence of money in politics. Public financing would be relatively inexpensive and would probably result in a higher voter turnout.

Some participants saw public financing as an acceptable, but less than ideal solution, and favored it despite some reservations. A man from Portland, Oregon, said "I'm not sure public financing is the total answer, but I think we need to recognize that people [lose trust] when they see reports that a big contributor gave five-hundred-thousand dollars." A moderator from Sun City, Arizona, said:

> People in our forum said public funding would be an okay solution. But their real goal was to level the playing field because now money "buys" issues and voices.

But a large minority opposed public financing and some were strongly opposed. A moderator from Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, said "While people in our forum wanted to make the campaign process more equitable, they also felt that 'equality is socialism, not democracy' and so did not favor public financing." A moderator from Topeka said people there said it is "not acceptable to give money to candidates they don't support." A woman from Muncy, Pennsylvania, said "My problem with public funding is I don't want my money going to a candidate who supports abortion."

And a fair number of participants left the forums mulling over the issue. "Every candidate should have an equal chance, but I'm not sure how to go about doing this," said a college student from Stillwater, Oklahoma. "No matter what we do in terms of a public financing law, they'll probably find loopholes in it," said a college student in Aberdeen, South Dakota.

7. Changed Perceptions about Lobbyists and Special Interests: *As people deliberate about a complex issue in what is usually a two-hour forum, they learn more about it and have time to consider other points of view. A common outcome is that people's attitudes are modified as they take in new information or considerations. In these forums, participants' views about lobbyists and special interests changed, with a good deal of people's initial antipathy melting as they learned and talked about the role of these groups.*

Changed Perceptions: Before and after the forums, participants felt that lobbyists and special interests have too much political influence. In the postforum questionnaire, 74 percent agreed that "lobbyists for special interests have too much power with public officials" and by a margin of 55 to 35, participants wanted to "curb the power of lobbyists, EVEN IF that means reducing the power of interest groups that speak for you." (See Tables 1 and 6.)

But as they deliberated, participants' antipathy toward lobbyists and special interests was reduced as they learned more about the role of both groups, including that they themselves might well be represented by one or both. A moderator from Columbus, Ohio, said "In our group, there was a broader understanding of what lobbyists are and less hostility toward them." A moderator from El Paso, Texas, said the same thing happened there. "We had a lot of initial tension between those who thought that 'lobbyist' is a dirty word versus those who thought we'd be in a pickle without them," she said, adding that much of that sentiment was blunted as they deliberated about the issue. A moderator from Winona, Minnesota, said "Our group felt that lobbyists have a right to have a cause and to fight and persuade for that cause." A man from Valparaiso, Indiana asked:

> Who says "special interests" are bad? Suppose I belong to the Sierra Club and we [use our influence to] keep the country clean. Is that a bad thing?

Most participants came to distinguish between lobbying, which they saw as both necessary and inevitable, and giving gifts or honoraria or special favors to lawmakers, which they said should be illegal. To general agreement, a St. Paul woman said, "Lobbyists should be getting information to [officeholders], but they should not be able to give gifts or money." A moderator from Mount Pleasant, Michigan, said that people in her forum wanted to "limit lobbyists' influence but clearly saw that there's an important place for them." A man from Des Moines said, "The people representing us are not super geniuses and they need someone to say, 'Here's something [you should know about] this issue.'" But, he added, elected officials do not need "someone saying, 'Let's take you to Cancun and spend a week there studying the issue at a swimming pool.'" In the postforum questionnaire, 69 percent said we should forbid lawmakers from accepting all gifts and favors from lobbyists. (See Table 2.)

8. Changed Perceptions about Disclosure: *Almost without exception, participants favored full, immediate disclosure of all campaign contributions, including disclosure in the media and on the Internet. But as they deliberated, participants said such disclosure would not really curb the influence of money or remedy the problems they had identified.*

Changed Perceptions: Both before and after the forums, nearly every participant favored full, complete and immediate disclosure of all campaign contributions, both in the news media and on the Internet. To general agreement, a woman at a forum in Portland, Oregon, said

"Average citizens don't know who is doing the contributing. We don't know how the money is used." A moderator from Louisville said his group favored disclosure within 48 hours "so that people can make up their minds about which interest groups favored which candidates."

But as they deliberated, most participants said that disclosure would not solve the money-and-politics problems they had identified. First, they said, citizens would be hard-pressed to know the connection between a contributor's interests and a candidate. A woman from Muncy, Pennsylvania, said "Disclosure, by itself, is not enough [because] people need to find the reason behind the donation as well." A moderator from Fairfield, California, said "In our forum, the key question was the relationship between donors and policy; that's far more important than just being saturated with information." A moderator from Laurel Lake, Missouri, said "Our group felt that citizens have no way of tracing the connections between big donors and candidates."

Some participants offered a second reason, saying full, strict, immediate disclosure would be hard to enforce in a timely manner. A participant in an on-line forum wrote: "If a candidate got a large contribution a few weeks before the election and refused to disclose it, what could the average person do?"

Indeed, the more they considered this approach, the more participants said that disclosure would not solve the problems they identified. "Disclosure might cut down on corruption, but it would not [do anything to] level the playing field," said a woman from Poughkeepsie. "Our group felt that disclosure would not solve the problem because a contributor would still expect something in return," said a moderator in Valparaiso, Indiana. A moderator from Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, said "No one in our group was opposed to disclosure, but no one thought it would solve the problem."

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9. Mixed Feelings about Direct Democracy Measures:
Participants' attitudes about this issue also evolved over the course of the forums. While most favored the idea of giving the public more of a direct say in running public affairs, a fair number saw problems with the idea and gave it, at best, their qualified support.

Direct Democracy Participants generally liked the concept of enabling the public to have more say through the use of referenda, ballot initiatives, and the recall of elected officials. In the postforum questionnaire, 62 percent agreed that "complex rules make it too hard for ordinary citizens to put issues on the ballot" and 55 percent wanted to "make it easier for voters to recall elected officials." (See Tables 1 and 2.)

But participants' support for direct democracy measures was qualified, with some expressing concern that the public's mood or top-of-the-head opinion at a given point in time might be intemperate and unwise. A woman from Portland, Oregon, said "There are a lot of things you could put on the ballot that would pass that would not be for the good of the state or the country." A man from Rindge, New Hampshire, expressed a similar view, saying, "A lot of time we'd try to 'recall' someone based on the emotion of the moment."

Others, including some participants with direct experience with ballot initiatives, were not so enthusiastic about this approach because of what they saw as unnecessary complexity or even deception. For example, a Michigan woman said, "These ballot [initiatives] use

doubletalk [and] make it so that a 'yes' is a 'no,' instead of using layman's terms so that everybody can understand it." People in California, a New York-area man said, frequently complain that television advertising for or against a ballot proposition is designed to mislead and deceive, making it difficult, even for voters who have a clear preference, to know what to vote for in order to exercise that preference. A moderator from Du Page, Illinois, said "Our group was concerned that when it came to ballot measures, the public would not be engaged and thus would not clearly understand an issue."

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10. Interlocking Issues: *Participants see "money and politics" not as a single issue, but as several connected, interlocking issues that are defined in public terms.*

Connected, Interlocking Issues: Some experts might say that the American people, as represented by participants in the National Issues Forums, have serious misperceptions about the issue of money and politics. They might say, for example, that people's discontent with the news media does not take into account the First Amendment or what is within a station's ability to control. And they might say that the public does not know even the basics about prior reforms or about key issues like campaign finance reform.

But to understand people's thinking we must understand that people define the issue in public, not expert terms.

- First, people believe the political system favors those with money, that money bends or warps or twists the system so that it routinely serves special interests instead of the broad, general public interest.

- Second, people believe that money skews the public dialogue by limiting the information they receive, making it hard for people to hear all the voices in the marketplace of ideas or understand what public leaders and candidates truly stand for.

- Third, they believe that instead of serving the public by counterbalancing all this, the news media actually exacerbate the problem.

Understanding how the public defines the issue helps us see ***the interlocking*** or ***interconnected*** nature of the issue in the public mind. An examination of this summary comment from a Florida woman reveals that she sees seven different issues related to money and politics, each numbered below:

> We should pursue the issue of allowing candidates free airtime (1) on radio and television in order to have their voices heard without having to cram their ideas (2) into exorbitantly expensive (3) 30-second spots. If candidates' views were made more accessible (4) to the public, [people] might take a greater interest (5) in picking a qualified candidate and not be so disillusioned (6) with what they consider to be corrupt leadership. And qualified leaders would be more likely to serve the public interest (7).

Questions and Answers about the Forums

I. The Public Approach

Questions

1. Does the public connect to this issue as the conventional wisdom suggests?

Not quite.

While some leaders see the public as deeply concerned about this issue, others point out that the number of Americans who name "campaign finance reform" as a priority varies from a high of no more than 37 percent to a low of 1 percent, depending on question wording. And so the "conventional wisdom" would seem to consist of more than one school of thought.

Participants in this year's National Issues Forums were troubled, not so much about the narrow issue of "campaign finance reform" but about the broader issue of "money and politics." Forum participants saw "money in politics" as an underlying cause of the public's alienation, cynicism, and feeling of disconnection from the political system. "There's a cancer in American politics. And that cancer is money," said a man at a forum in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Participants defined the issue to encompass not only campaign contributions but also the day-to-day influence of money on governmental decision making, usually at the federal level, and the impact of money on what we will call "the public dialogue."

Participants did not think in expert terms. For example, there was almost no mention of hard or soft money, let alone the distinction between the two, and little talk of PACs; and even well-publicized campaign finance reform measures such as the McCain-Feingold bill were rarely mentioned.

Importantly, however, "expert knowledge" is different from "public knowledge." While it is true that people in the forums did not have an expert's understanding of the ins and outs of this issue, they were deeply concerned about the corrosive effect of money on the nation's public dialogue, public policy, and political system.

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2. How does the public approach the issue?

With real distress.

Forum participants said that because of the influence of money, the political system is warped or twisted so that it routinely subordinates the public interest to special, moneyed interests. A woman at a forum in St. Paul said, "Basically it only takes one or two people with a lot of money to offset the influence of many, many voters." A woman from Panama City, Florida, said "Right now the whole system is broken."

3. Are there other dimensions of the issue that people in the forums see?

Yes.

Participants said that instead of counterbalancing the influence of money, the news media exacerbate the problem.

The role of the media, participants suggested, is to help citizens understand their choices, including the costs and consequences of each, so that people can sort through the cacophony of voices vying for their attention and make a decision about them. The media's role, accordingly, should be to offset the influence of money (which skews what people hear) by helping the public understand all that exists in the "marketplace of ideas."

But instead of enabling citizens to hear all the viewpoints that deserve their consideration, the media, participants said, present issues narrowly, and often in terms of two extremes. For example, a moderator in Atlanta said participants there felt that the media always present issues in terms of two sides - liberal vs. conservative, Democrat vs. Republican. And as a result, the average person often finds it hard to locate his or her own point of view or deep concerns expressed in a polarized public dialogue.

II. The Deliberation

4. What values were at play in the discussion?

A number of values were at play in the discussion.

The Public Interest. Participants felt that the common public interest is regularly subordinated to the narrow, special interest of those with money. A moderator from Vallejo, California, said people in that forum "felt that they are not represented because politicians serve large donors rather than the people who cast the votes."

Integrity. Many participants said the need for campaign contributions is so great that it is a constant threat to officials' independence and integrity. In an on-line forum, one participant wrote, "A democracy committed to a culture of integrity should have, as one of its highest values, the principle that elected officials ought not to be tied to special interests. They should serve on behalf of all citizens, no matter how poor or unable to contribute."

Fairness. Participants felt that all candidates for office should be able to compete on a roughly level playing field so that all had a chance to make themselves known and their views considered. In a day-to-day sense, participants felt that the public should be able to consider all serious ideas about public issues. A man from Albertson, New York, said "People don't have equal opportunity to run for office."

The American Dream. Though there was no consensus about how to make this happen, participants wanted to ensure that well-qualified people are not foreclosed from seeking office because of a lack of personal wealth. A student from Stillwater, Oklahoma, said "Only those with a lot of money seem to run [for public office]. But being wealthy does not mean someone is qualified."

Freedom. A number of participants said that individuals should be free to spend their money as they choose, and wanted to balance this freedom against their desire to curb the influence of money. A student from Aberdeen, South Dakota, said that while people are frustrated by the political system, "they also value the freedom of doing what they want for a candidate they support."

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5. What effect did deliberation have?

Deliberation had two pronounced effects.

First, participants' antipathy toward "lobbyists" and "special interests" abated as they came to see that they might be represented by either. A South Dakota college student said, "As a future educator, I want my voice [as represented by teachers' groups] to be heard in Washington."

Second, deliberation affected how people felt about disclosure. While nearly everyone favored full, immediate disclosure of contributions, most said, as they deliberated, that disclosure would not reduce the influence of money on politics because:

- Contributions could easily be disguised;
- Citizens would find it hard to sort through so much information and make connections between contributors and their interests; and
- Strict disclosure would be hard to enforce in a timely fashion and voters would be pressed to quickly process so much information.

A New Hampshire man asked, "How can you enforce a disclosure requirement if we can't enforce any other kind of regulation in politics?"

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6. What mattered to people as they deliberated?

As they deliberated, people agreed that money:

a) ***Challenges democratic values.***

Participants strongly felt that government should first serve the public interest. But because of money, they said, officials, especially at the federal level but also at the state and local level, give higher priority to the interests of those with money. A woman from Dallas said, "You still have the opportunity to buy government. Which means I influence how all of you live your lives."

b) ***Reduces people's sense of being connected to the political system.***

Participants said that while ordinary Americans want to be more connected to the political system, they are alienated by the influence of money. "What people like me think just doesn't count anymore," said a man from St. Paul. "Because it's the politicians, with the money from lobbyists and special interests, taking care of their friends [instead of ordinary people]."

III. The Outcomes

7. Is a "public voice" recognizable?

Yes.

First, they said that ***money corrupts the political system*** so that it is responsive, not to the public interest, but to special, moneyed interests.

Second, participants said that ***money corrupts the public dialogue*** by skewing and limiting the information people receive, making it hard for them to understand what candidates stand for, or the true costs and consequences of various positions on key issues.

As a result, they said, many Americans are alienated from public life.

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8. Was any firm common ground for action revealed?

Yes.

Participants called for more public education and more discussion about the issue in order to raise its visibility and help people see what is at stake. A participant from Stillwater, Oklahoma, said "We need to keep deliberating, examine all the options." A participant from Honolulu echoed this sentiment saying that what was covered in the forum was "the tip of the iceberg. We need to go into greater depth."

In terms of specifics, participants said these steps would reduce the influence of money and politics:

- Permit campaign contributions only by individuals, limit what anyone can contribute, and shorten campaigns;
- Prohibit lobbyists from giving gifts and require full, immediate disclosure for all contributions; and
- Make sure all serious candidates have free or low-cost access to the media, use public financing of elections, and take other steps to "level the playing field" and ensure that more candidates have a fair, reasonable chance to be heard and considered.

However, these views should be seen, not as policy prescriptions, but as "proxies" or guidelines for change that stems from participants' values and their deeply rooted concerns.

9. At what stage is the public on this issue? Has the public's thinking evolved?

Some experts might say the public, as represented by people in the forums, is poorly informed about this issue. They might say, for example, that the public's discontent with the media does not take into account the First Amendment and that the public does not know certain basics about the issue, including the political lines of demarcation around campaign finance reform.

But understanding public thinking about the issue requires understanding what it means for the public to know something, i.e., public knowledge, as well as the framework people bring to an issue.

Participant's knowledge of this issue – like the public's knowledge about so many other issues, including education and health care - comes from a combination of concern, direct experience, common sense, and what people talk about with their friends and family members as well as what they learn from the news media.

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10. What needs to happen next in the national dialogue?

Despite all the news coverage about campaign finance reform over the past few years, participants simply did not talk about money and politics in those terms. And so, if the issue is framed in terms of "campaign finance," most people cannot see a role for themselves. But to most people "money and politics" is a totally different issue.

People's Thinking after the Forums: The Impact of Deliberation

There is no single, uniform effect of participating in a National Issues Forum. Deliberating with other citizens about a public issue often has an impact, sometimes a dramatic impact on people's thinking. But the nature of that impact is sometimes similar and sometimes not.

As people deliberated about money and politics, they often learned more and began to develop a deeper, clearer, more certain judgment about what to do. "I know a little more now to help me form an opinion," said a man from Dallas. A Florida man said, "The forum opened my mind to other approaches to regulate money in politics such as funding elections through public funds." A man from Rapid City, South Dakota, said that he had learned about the issue and that "now I can brainstorm ways to fix the problems."

Some became more concerned about the issue. "I'm more angry than before the forum," said a woman from Hoschton, Georgia. A man from Hyde Park, New York, agreed, saying "I'm more vehement in my belief that there needs to be reform."

Sometimes people left feeling upbeat, including a Georgia woman who said, "My awareness [about] finding an acceptable and equitable solution has been brightened." But some reached the opposite view. "I realize the problems are far more complex than would lend themselves to simple solutions," said a man from Poughkeepsie. "I'm not confident that true reform is possible," said a woman from Des Moines.

Some participants including a college student from Stillwater, Oklahoma, said they had changed their mind about some aspects of the issue. "I had a very one-sided opinion on several issues, mainly lobbyists, [and] now I have a much broader view." Others said their preforum thinking had been strengthened. "I'm even more sure that campaign finance reform needs to happen," said a woman from Independence, Missouri. "I believe even more strongly in full disclosure," said a man from Adrian, Michigan.

Finally, it was frequently the case with these National Issues Forums that people walked away mulling over the issue or stewing about it. "I understand now that this is all very complicated and that finding one true answer is next to impossible," said a woman from Rapid City, South Dakota. "My thinking is more muddied about the issue. But it's a thoughtful kind of confusion," said a woman from Osage Beach, Missouri.

Deliberation by High School Students

Below is a summary of what happened when high school students deliberated in, and sometimes moderated, forums at the 4-H Association National Conference in Chevy Chase, Maryland; Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York; Montgomery Community College in Rockville, Maryland; Potomac High School in Dumfries, Virginia; and Northern University in Aberdeen, South Dakota.

The Students' Starting Point: One moderator said the issue was not especially relevant to students who were 14 and 15. "Initially, most of the younger kids found the issue confusing," said a moderator at the 4-H forums. Indeed, a great many high school students were "not sure" about a host of questionnaire items before the forums. But in Winona, Minnesota, where students deliberated about the issue for two, two-hour sessions, a moderator said the more they deliberated, the more they learned "and their interest in it increased a lot." And some students, especially the 17-year-olds, were interested in the issue from the beginning of the forum. "Our kids were from a leadership training program," said a moderator in Rockville, Maryland. "And many of them were more informed about this issue than they are about many others."

Regardless of their initial interest, the vast majority of the students came at the issue with a cynical attitude. "Our kids felt that people with money run democracy," said a moderator at the 4-H forums. "Our students were very cynical and felt that money dirties the system," said a moderator in Hempstead, New York. A high school teacher in Dumfries, Virginia, said his group felt that "there is too much money corrupting public officials and the political process."

As They Deliberated: The students did not always agree about what to do. Some, including many at the 4-H forums and in Winona, Minnesota, wanted to cap contributions and campaign spending. But in Dumfries, Virginia, and Aberdeen, South Dakota, most opposed this step, saying any limit on spending or donations would amount to limiting freedom of speech. On Long Island, students favored public financing. But in South Dakota and at the 4-H forums, most students opposed this idea.

When it came to lobbyists and disclosure, the students' thinking evolved, with initial hostility toward lobbyists easing as students learned more about them. "Our kids felt that while lobbyists should not have so much influence or be able to corrupt the process, they are necessary," said a moderator from Rockville, Maryland. Moreover, while there was strong support for disclosure, many students concluded that this reform would not solve the problem. "Our students said, 'People will always find a way to get around any law," said a moderator from Dumfries, Virginia.

The Impact of Deliberation: The reaction of the young people to the forum experience was often dramatic. In Rockville, Maryland, students felt that though they disagreed, they acknowledged and respected their right to do so. And sometimes, students left the forums stewing about the issue. A young woman from Aberdeen, South Dakota, said that in the course of the 90-minute forum she had "done about 300 [mental] flip-flops" about different aspects of the issue.

Questionnaire Results

NIF issue books include a pre- and postforum questionnaire that participants may fill out at the forum. In the tables below, we report the questionnaire results from 1,457 participants who sent in questionnaires by August 1, 2001. The results are analyzed separately so that the views of 581 high school students can be compared to the responses of participants 18 and older.

Those who filled out the questionnaires are a self-selected group and thus the questionnaire outcomes should not be construed as polling data using a probability sample that yields results within a statistically precise margin of sampling error. The outcomes should be considered in conjunction with the rest of this analysis as indicative of how a diverse group of Americans feel about money and politics after deliberating together, considering other points of view, and weighing the costs and consequences of different approaches to the issue.

Participants' Pre- and Postforum Views

Large majorities said money has a harmful effect on politics.

Agree with Statement

Table 1 Statement:	Preforum %	Postforum %	Difference %
High campaign costs discourage good people from running for office	84	84	—
Candidates depend too heavily on large campaign gifts from wealthy donors	78	79	1
Current election laws favor those who already hold office	74	79	5
Lobbyists for special interests have too much power with public officials	69	74	5
Complex rules make it too hard for ordinary citizens to put issues on the ballot	59	62	3

Large numbers favored a number of steps to reduce the influence of money.

Agree with Statement

Table 2 We Should:	Preforum %	Postforum %	Difference %
Strictly limit the amounts of money citizens and special interests can give to political causes	65	70	5
Require radio and TV stations to give free airtime to candidates	64	63	1
Forbid lawmakers from accepting all gifts and favors from lobbyists	62	69	7
Make it easier for voters to recall elected officials	52	55	3
Let candidates raise as much money as they want, but strictly enforce disclosure laws	46	49	3
Lift restrictions on campaign fund-raising to ensure that all candidates have a chance to win	43	49	6

The number that "strongly" favored a number of measures increased after the forums.

"Strongly" Agree with Statement

Table 3 Statement	Preforum %	Postforum %	Difference %
High campaign costs discourage good people from running for office	40	48	8
Current election laws favor those who already hold office	34	41	7
Forbid lawmakers from accepting gifts and favors from lobbyists	34	44	10
Strictly limit the amount of money special interests can give to political causes	28	37	9

Adults' Preforum Views Compared to High School Students

Adults were more likely than high school students to say that current laws favor incumbents and that lobbyists have too much power.

Agree with Statement

Table 4 Statement:	18 & Over %	17 & Under %	Difference %
High campaign costs discourage good people from running for office	87	81	+6
Current election laws favor those who already hold office	83	61	+22
Candidates depend too heavily on large campaign gifts from wealthy donors	82	73	+9
Lobbyists for special interests have too much power with public officials	77	56	+21
Complex rules make it too hard for ordinary citizens to put issues on the ballot	62	55	+7
Restricting political donations infringes on the free speech of citizens	33	34	-1

Adults were more likely to favor a number of measures to reduce the influence of money.

Agree with Statement

Table 5 We Should:	18 & Over %	17 & Under %	Difference %
Require radio and TV stations to give free airtime to candidates	72	52	+20
Forbid lawmakers from accepting all gifts and favors from lobbyists	71	48	+23
Strictly limit the amounts of money citizens and special interests can give to political causes	70	59	+11
Make it easier for voters to recall elected officials	56	48	+8
Let candidates raise as much money as they want, but strictly enforce disclosure laws	45	48	-3
Lift restrictions on campaign fund-raising to ensure that all candidates have a chance to win	36	55	-19

Participants' Postforum Views

After the forums, participants wanted to curb the power of lobbyists and use public funds to finance elections, but opposed removing the restrictions on political donations.

Table 6 Statement	Strongly/Somewhat Favor %	Strongly/Somewhat Oppose %	Difference %
Curb the power of lobbyists for special interests, EVEN IF that means reducing the power of interest groups that speak for you	55	35	+20
Reduce the power of special interests by using public funds to finance elections, EVEN IF that would cost taxpayers more money	53	40	+13
Remove restrictions on political donations, EVEN IF that means that some candidates will have much more money than their opponents	26	65	-39

Demographics (Participants 18 and over)

Table 7
Are you male or female?

	%
Female	52
Male	47
No answer	1

Table 8
How Much Schooling Have You Completed?

	%
High school grad or less	15
Some college	34
College grad or more	51
No answer	1

Table 9
Are you?

	%
White	83
African American	4
Asian American	3
Native American	2
Hispanic/Latino	2
Other	4
No answer	2

Table 10
How old are you?

	%
18 - 29	47
30 - 49	19
50 - 64	20
65 or older	15
No Answer	—

Table 11
Where Do You Live?

	%
Northeast	22
South	10
Midwest	24
Southwest	13
West	5
Other	5
No Answer	22

Demographics (Participants 17 and under)

Table 12
Are you male or female?

	%
Female	62
Male	38
No answer	—

Table 13
Where Do You Live?

	%
Northeast	17
South	9
Midwest	61
Southwest	3
West	2
Other	4
No Answer	5

Table 14
Are You?

	%
White	85
African American	3
Asian American	5
Native American	2
Hispanic/Latino	1
Other	4
No Answer	1

Methodology

In preparing this analysis of people's thinking about "Money and Politics: Who Owns Democracy?" Doble Research drew on a sample of forums in 44 states and the District of Columbia from the hundreds of forums that took place across the country. Five research methods were used:

"A Public Voice" Forums

We transcribed and analyzed four National Issues Forums videotaped for the annual PBS special, "A Public Voice," hosted by Frank Sesno. Those forums took place in Panama City, Florida; Des Moines, Iowa; Rindge, New Hampshire; and Portland, Oregon.

Moderator and Convenor Interviews

We conducted 22 telephone interviews with forum moderators and convenors. We asked them to describe people's main concerns, their starting points on the issue, the costs and consequences they took into consideration, and the shared understanding or common ground for action that emerged. The forums were held at:

1. The Carter Library, Atlanta, GA
2. The College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL
3. The General Federated Women's Club, Mount Pleasant, MI
4. Gulf Coast Community College, Panama City, FL
5. Hawaii State Capital, Honolulu, HI
6. Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY
7. KCOS (Channel 13) live broadcast, El Paso, TX
8. Laurel Lake Retirement Community, Hudson, OH
9. Minnesota Humanities Commission, Winona, MN
10. Montgomery College, Rockville, MD
11. National 4-H Conference Center, Chevy Chase, MD
12. The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH
13. Outreach Center for the Baptist Church, Topeka, KS
14. Potomac High School, Dumfries, VA
15. Private Residence, Sun City, AZ
16. Public Library, Gibsonia, PA
17. St. Raphael Church, Louisville, KY
18. The Chiesman Foundation, Rapid City, SD
19. United Methodist Church, Fairfield, CA
20. Valparaiso Public Library, Valparaiso, IN
21. Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA
22. On-line forums with participants across the country

Special thanks to the convenors and moderators who shared their forum reflections with us: Joyce Buttermore, Renee Daugherty, Bennie Davis, Joel Diemond, Bill DiMascio, Michael D'Innocenzo, Larkin Dudley, Jim Erickson, Sadie Flucas, Delores Foley, Monica Gomez, Tim Grove, Jeanmarie Heriba, Steve Haseley, Margaret Holt, Terry Jack, Hanson Kappelman, Judith Kirkey, Karen Leith, Laurie Maak, Phyllis Nelson, Carole Paterson, Craig Paterson, Dave Patton, Russell Petty, Joan Pinkerton, Joan Porter, Tracy Russman, Bruce Smith, James Smith, Nathan Starr, Susan Taylor, Sue Williams, Kristi Wagner.

Forum Observations

We observed four National Issues Forums, listening to initial concerns and learning how deliberation influenced people's thinking. In addition, we interviewed two participants and the moderator after each forum. These forums were held at:

1. Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD
2. Dutchess Community College, Poughkeepsie, NY
3. State Correctional Institute, Muncy, PA
4. The Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK

Questionnaire Results

Before and after a forum, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that frames the issue and identifies key tradeoffs for different choices. We analyzed a total of 1,457 pre- and postforum questionnaires, including 581 from high school students, received by August 1, 2001.

Research Forums

We conducted three research forums or focus groups, each with a demographically representative cross-section of up to a dozen people. The sessions paralleled NIF forums in that participants viewed the starter video, filled out the pre- and postforum questionnaires, and deliberated together about the choices for about two hours. The research forums were held in:

1. Detroit, MI	1/4/01
2. St. Paul, MN	2/22/01
3. Dallas, TX	5/17/01

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Methodology

People who participated in the NIF forums analyzed for this report are a sample of the thousands of people who continue to deliberate about this issue in communities across the country. Forum participants represented in this report came from the following states and communities:

Alabama
Arizona
Arkansas
California
Colorado
Connecticut
Delaware
District of Columbia
Florida
Georgia
Hawaii
Illinois
Indiana
Iowa
Kansas
Kentucky
Louisiana
Maryland
Michigan
Minnesota
Mississippi
Missouri
Montana
Nebraska
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New Mexico
New York
North Carolina
North Dakota
Ohio
Oklahoma
Oregon
Pennsylvania
Rhode Island
South Carolina
South Dakota
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Virginia
Washington
West Virginia
Wisconsin
Wyoming

About National Issues Forums

National Issues Forums (NIF) bring together citizens to deliberate and make choices about challenging social and political issues of the day. They have addressed issues such as the economy, education, health care, foreign affairs, and crime.

Throughout the nation, thousands of civic, service, and religious organizations, as well as libraries, high schools, and colleges, sponsor forums. The sponsoring organizations select topics based on citizens' concerns, then design and coordinate their own forum programs.

A Different Kind of Talk

No two forums are alike. While they range from small study circles to large gatherings modeled after town meetings, all forums are unlike everyday conversations and adversarial debates. Since forums seek to increase understanding of complicated issues, participants need not start out with detailed knowledge of an issue. Forum organizers distribute issue books featuring a nonpartisan overview of an issue and a choice of several public responses. By presenting each issue in a nonpartisan way, forums encourage participants to take a fresh look at the issues and at their own convictions.

In the forums, participants share their opinions, their concerns, and their knowledge. With the help of moderators, the issue books, and a "starter" videotape, participants weigh several possible ways for society to address a problem. They analyze each choice, the arguments for and against it, and the tradeoffs and other implications of the choice. Moderators encourage participants as they gravitate to one option or another, to examine their basic values as individuals and as community members.

The Common Ground

Forums enrich participants' thinking on public issues. Participants confront each issue head-on, make an informed decision about how to address it, and come to terms with the likely consequences of their choices. In this deliberative process, participants often accept choices that are not entirely consistent with their individual wishes and that impose costs they had not initially considered. This happens because the forum process helps people see issues from different points of view; participants use discussion to discover, not persuade or advocate. The best deliberative forums can help participants move toward shared, stable, well-informed public judgments about important issues.

Participants may hold sharply different opinions and beliefs, but in the forums they discuss their attitudes, concerns, and convictions about each issue and, as a group, seek to resolve their conflicting priorities and principles. In this way, participants move from making individual choices, to making choices as members of a community – the kind of choices from which public action may result.

Building Community through Public Deliberation

In a democracy, citizens must come together to find answers they can all live with while acknowledging that individuals have differing opinions. Forums help people find areas where their interests and goals overlap, which allows a public voice to emerge that can give direction to public policy.

The forums are nonpartisan and do not advocate a particular solution to any public issue, nor should they be confused with referenda or public opinion polls. Rather, the forums enable diverse groups of citizens to determine together what direction they want policy to take, what kinds of action and legislation they favor, and what, for their common good, they oppose.

From Agreement to Action

Forums can lead to several kinds of public action. Generally, a public voice emerges in the results of the forums, and that helps set the government's compass, since forum results are shared with elected officials each year. Also, as a result of attending forums, individuals and groups may decide to take action individually or in association with others to help remedy a public problem.

About Doble Research

Doble Research Associates is a public interest consulting firm that specializes in exploring, from a nonpartisan perspective, public and leadership opinion about complex public issues including crime and corrections, education, health care, and teenage pregnancy. Each year, Doble Research prepares an "NIF Report on the Issues" that analyzes how citizens across the country are thinking about a difficult issue in National Issues Forums. Doble Research is located in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey and can be contacted at www.DobleResearch.com or at (201) 568-7200.

Doble Research Clients and Partner Organizations:

Foundations

The Center for Crime, Communities & Culture (Open Society Institute/The Soros Foundation)
The Chiesman Foundation
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation
The Community Life Foundation of Owensboro
The Englewood Community Foundation
The Fetzer Institute
The Walter and Elise Haas Fund
The Hager Educational Foundation
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
The Kellogg Foundation
The Kettering Foundation
The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
The Peninsula Community Foundation
The Pew Charitable Trust
The Seva Foundation

Government Agencies

The Board of Pardons and Parole, State of Georgia
The Department of Corrections, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
The Department of Corrections, State of Indiana
The Department of Corrections, State of Vermont
The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
The Governor's Family Council, State of Delaware
The National Institute of Corrections (NIC)
The National Institute of Justice (NIJ)
The National Parks Service, Nebraska
The Vermont Commission on Public Healthcare Values and Priorities

Public Service Organizations

The American Judicature Society
The Audubon Area Community Services, Owensboro, Kentucky
The Buckeye Association for School Administrators
The Center for Effective Public Policy
The Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM)
The Cleveland Summit on Education
The Council of Governors' Policy Advisors
The Council of State Governments, Eastern Regional Office
The Educational and Social Science Consortium
The General Federation of Women's Clubs
The Harwood Institute
The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC)
The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)
The National Academy of Social Insurance
The National Environmental Policy Institute (NEPI)
The National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI)
The Oklahoma State-Centered Project
The Pennsylvania Prison Society
The Points of Light Foundation
Public Agenda
The South Carolina State-Centered Project
The Southern Growth Policies Board (SGPB)
The Southern Regional Council
The Study Circle Resources Center (SCRC)
Weavings, A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life
The West Virginia Center for Civic Life
The Western Governors' Association

States

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The State of New Hampshire
The State of North Carolina
The State of Oregon
The State of South Carolina

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For information, contact:
National Issues Forums Research
100 Commons Road
Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777

1-800-433-7834
www.nifi.org

NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

A Different Kind of Talk, Another Way to Act